

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

I CAN'T WRITE ABOUT THE ARGUMENT WITH Norma that started the day, because I'm too close to it. I can't write about the thousands of people killed in an earthquake halfway around the world, because I'm too far away.

I'M NOT A HAPPILY MARRIED MAN THIS MORN-ing. I'm not a grateful citizen in the United States of Love. Go ahead. Tell me I live in the greatest country in the world. Remind me how many soldiers gave their lives to protect the freedoms I take for granted: My right to tell my wife she hurt my feelings. Her right to remain silent.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE ARRIVES, AND NOT A MO-ment too soon. These long nights stir up too many ghosts. I'm ready for the days to start lengthening again. But who am I to question the movement of the seasons? My wish for some kind of eternal springtime is laughable, like Bush's plan to bring democracy to Iraq. As if we had a surplus of democracy here in the United States. As if all our democratic institutions were humming along at peak efficiency, and everyone's basic rights were being respected, and we were all feeling so magnificently equal that we could afford to give some of it away. But I digress. Forget Bush. Forget the sad fact that the future hasn't turned out the way my high-school social-studies teacher predicted. The light returns — no matter how many times we've been wrong. The light doesn't vote for president, or run for president, or care who's president. The light doesn't study itself in the mirror, compare itself to last year's light, wonder how many light years it has left. The light isn't afraid of darkness. When the light arrives, darkness flees.

LAST NIGHT I POLISHED OFF TWO PINTS OF FAT-free, sugar-free, taste-free ice cream. You could say I wanted to have my cake *and* eat it *and* not gain any weight. But what's the difference between being greedy for power, for example, and being greedy for being thin? Yes, I'm the kind of superpower that grabs what it wants. The rule of law? You must be kidding.

TO CELEBRATE OUR WEDDING ANNIVERSARY, I suggested to Norma that we splurge on a glamorous hotel in one of the most glamorous cities in the world. But once we'd arrived in our corner suite and stepped onto our balcony ten stories above the crowded, noisy street, I was reminded of the devil tempting Jesus at the top of the mountain, showing him all the kingdoms of the world and promising him all the power and glamour he could ever want. Yes, for that week I was a king who knew the best places to eat, the best shows to see, the best man to call to reupholster the throne. But when I looked around for the glamorous couple here to celebrate their undying love, I saw only us.

I WAS GRATEFUL TO EAT IN SUCH AN ELEGANT restaurant, but the food was presented with disconcerting flair,

as if the matter at hand weren't to serve a hungry person a piece of fish. But it wasn't just a piece of fish. It was Tahitian Vanilla Poached Alaska Halibut with Mango Salsa and Forbidden Black Rice. (Apparently the rice wasn't that forbidden.)

I CAN START THE DAY BY APPOINTING A SPECIAL prosecutor to investigate why Sy didn't get more work done last week. I can call the newspapers and talk off the record about how often he daydreams about sex. I can have him arrested and put in a small, dark cell with no food or water. (That means no snacks, either, I'll remind him.) I can make him talk, then ignore everything he says. Yes, I have the power this morning to subject him to the worst kind of ridicule, kick him when he's down, laugh when he starts to cry. And he'll believe me, won't he, when I tell him it isn't me he's disappointed but God? He'll believe me, won't he, when I tell him God has had it up to here with his appetites and obsessions, with his promises to love himself?

WHEN I DEPEND ON WHAT I KNOW, I NEVER GET very far. As the meditation teacher Stephen Levine writes, "The mind creates an abyss, but the heart crosses it."

IN A FEW MINUTES I'LL WAKE NORMA BY GETTING back into bed, drawing her close, and whispering, "Good morning." She prefers this to waking up to music or the news, as long as I don't start talking too much or expect a sunny greeting in return, and, most importantly, as long as I keep my hands to myself. At sixty-two, I find it easier to keep up my end of the bargain than I did at fifty-two or forty-two. In fact, at forty-two, I'd wake her with a phone call, having gone into the office before dawn so that we didn't have to start each day with the kind of border skirmish that leads to making love or making war.

I RECEIVED MEDITATION INSTRUCTION THIS morning from my cat Nimbus. First she tucked her front paws beneath her chest to demonstrate correct posture. Then she closed her eyes. She breathed in. She breathed out. *And remember to purr*, she purred.

TODAY I'M THANKFUL FOR THE WORD GRATITUDE, a word in which I can make myself at home. It's not a prestigious Park Avenue condominium of a word like *transcendence* or a palatial mansion of a word like *enlightenment*. *Gratitude* is four walls, a ceiling, a floor. And a chair? Yes! And a window!

NORMA AND I HAVE BEEN MARRIED NEARLY twenty-five years, and I'm still the hopelessly romantic schmuck I was in 1983. When she was away last week, how did I feel? Like a question without an answer. Like a column of figures that didn't add up. And when she returned? As happy as a thief slipping into a rich man's house at night. As happy as winter opening his eyes one morning and seeing the face of spring.